

COVID-19

Friendships and Connections During COVID

By E. Ford Stephens, DRI National Director

This week, my wife and I are helping our youngest child move into her first-year dorm. Technically, she already is a college student, having started attending classes by Zoom over a week ago. Her university had postponed the move-in date once, so we were on pins and needles, especially as we watched some nearby peer institutions go all online and close down their on-campus housing. But, the leaders of her university sent out an email last Friday, noting that “critical parts of a college education cannot be replicated online,” including the opportunity “to form friendships that will sustain them for many years, if not a lifetime.” Amen.

E. M. Forster famously used as the motto of *Howards End* the admonition: “Only connect!” And connections continue to play an important role as we wait for a vaccine or effective treatment for COVID-19.

Soon after the pandemic was upon us, I took my first Zoom deposition. I was in my Richmond office (social distancing, mind you), the court reporter—and his dog—were in a nearby county, the plaintiff’s lawyer was in his Virginia Beach office (near a naval air station), and the plaintiff deponent was at her house (which had dodgy Wi-Fi). I knew the plaintiff’s lawyer, and when I pre-sent my deposition exhibits to the court reporter and him the night before, I asked that he not look at them or allow his client to look at them until the deposition started. The plaintiff’s lawyer readily agreed.

I have no question that he kept his word. The deposition went off without a hitch, aside from some occasional barking, jets screaming overhead, and pixilation. I am not so certain that the outcome would have been the same if

the plaintiff’s lawyer and I had not had a connection before the deposition.

Soon after that deposition, I participated in a Zoom call with members of my “home” substantive law committee at DRI. The call took place shortly after we were to have convened in New Orleans for our annual seminar, which had been cancelled by COVID-19. The occasion of the call

was bittersweet; we gathered to mourn the death of a much beloved member of our committee community, while we also celebrated our good fortune to have known such a wonderful person. There were over 50 people on the call, from all around the country, and many of us shared uplifting stories of what a thoughtful, caring, and encouraging person our friend had been to us.

Toward the end of the call, a participant

who had already offered one such story returned to the main screen. “I have to tell you,” she said, “I really miss you guys.” That short, heartfelt statement struck a chord, expressing the sentiment that we all felt.

To me, that is the essence of DRI. We connect and form lasting relationships by participating in committees and the other terrific opportunities that DRI offers, and by working together for the betterment of our organization. We are a community, one that is not confined to a particular, region, time zone, or even country.

During my years attending DRI functions, volunteering on SLCs, and now serving on the board, I have had the great fortune to meet and get to know good lawyers who are even better people. This has happened while planning



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webinars, working on 50-state compendia, and participating in committee calls. Over the phone and through the internet, such opportunities continue today.

Pre-COVID, attending the DRI Leadership Conference and DRI board meetings also were opportunities for me to connect. But, nonwork moments have provided some of the best introductions. They have come at DRI seminar breakfasts, cocktail hours, and dine-arounds; at receptions, evening events, and in the hospitality suite at DRI Annual Meetings; and during impromptu conversations while walking back after dinner, meeting in hotel lobbies, and taking the Blue Line to O'Hare.

Hang in there: this pandemic will not last forever. As we wait to travel once again without quarantines, DRI's staff and volunteers are providing valuable content and events that can benefit us all. Their efforts have been Herculean, and the results extraordinary. As just a small sampling: the website has a detailed DRI Coronavirus Information Center with an amazing number of links to helpful information; and from now until the end of the year, I count nine virtual

seminars (including the Annual Meeting) on DRI's schedule, as well as and seven dates for serial education.

So take part in DRI's upcoming [Virtual Annual Meeting](#), and in as many DRI online series and seminars, video "Fly-Ins," and telephonic meetings as you can this fall. You can never tell what friends you might meet online, and then later see in person after we get the "all clear" signal.

And, in these days when connectivity and community are so important, what better time could there be to reach out to a friend, a colleague, or someone at your firm about joining DRI? Even if some managing partners are scaling back on their financial support, individual lawyers will find that paying the dues themselves is a small price to pay to be become part of the DRI community.

The founder of the university that my daughter attends was eminently quotable. And about friendship, he once said: "Friendship is precious not only in the shade but in the sunshine of life: and thanks to a benevolent arrangement of things, the greater part of life is sunshine." Amen.

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